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26 January 2010

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Clark, T. J. A. (2007) 'A green Blanchot ? impossible.', Paragraph., 30 (3). pp. 121-140.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/para.2007.30.3.121>

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A Green Blanchot: Impossible?

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Abstract:

Blanchot's work may at first seem remote from any sort of environmentalist thinking. While elements of his work share with Levinas and Heidegger a problematic privileging of the human, Blanchot nevertheless offers the basis of what might be seen as a timely 'deeper ecological' thinking, one that can engage the destructive anthropocentrism of Western thought and tradition in the very minutiae of its literary and philosophical texts. Unlike in much 'green' philosophy, no concept of nature or earth serves as foundation for Blanchot's thought. He is engaged by the 'impossible' as that which is not a matter of human power or decision, affirmed in both its ethical force and its contestation of dominant and appropriative conceptions of knowledge, rationality and invention. A comparison is offered between Max Oelschlager's representative ecocritical essay 'Earth-Talk: Conservation and Ecology', with its romantic attempt to find and celebrate modes of unalienated or 'natural' language, and Blanchot's practice of what can be seen as a more radical and questioning 'ecology' based on almost opposite conceptions.

Keywords: Blanchot, nature, impossible, deep ecology, physis, animal, anthropocentrism, ethics, environmentalism

Blanchot's work belongs with that of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche in locating the sources of many of the crises facing Western humanity, and now humanity in general, in deep ontological presuppositions, pervasive habits of thinking that are inherently aggressive or rapacious. Yet unlike Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of whom thematize the 'earth' in ways that have inspired environmentalist thinkers, Blanchot's work seems at first remote from anything recognisably like green issues.

Partly, no doubt, out of a reaction against pseudo-agrarian elements in Heidegger's work, Blanchot's writing, with its overwhelmingly urban climate, affirms a kind of anti-essentialist nomadism, refusing all forms of nostalgia and insidious notions of 'rootedness'. This cannot but set Blanchot challengingly against much that might seem attractive yet finally unacceptable in much environmentalist thought with terms like 'nature' and 'the earth'. That granted, it is very striking how, compared to almost any page of Heidegger or Nietzsche, Blanchot's

writing is almost totally void of references to or images from the natural world. One might even imagine, reading Blanchot's *oeuvre*, that humanity and its artifacts were in sole possession of the Earth. His considerable body of work on Rilke barely takes up the issue of that poet's attention to the mode of being of animals, even when that is the explicit topic of a poem being cited ('Duino Elegy, 8').¹ To work through one end of *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980) to the other looking for any reference to non-human life is to find nothing, bar one anti-natural figure ('*A rose blossoming into a bud*'). After a striking passage at the end of *Thomas the Obscure* does any bird ever fly across a page of Blanchot?²

This essay tries to address the seeming absence in Blanchot of what is increasingly seen as an epochal issue—the crisis in human self-conceptions being wrought by the intensifying degradation of the planet itself. How far can Blanchot's thinking, his famous refusal of the present, encompass this issue?

Global Responsibility

One evident connection between environmentalist thinkers and Blanchot's work lies in the attention both give to the unprecedented nature of the contemporary world as one in which humanity, become truly global, enters an era of risk and self-questioning. Blanchot's meditations often show a planetary awareness, one that we would now associate with 'globalization', but which Blanchot described in relation to claims about the 'end of history' or, as below, to the thought of Teilhard de Chardin. He writes:

we have entered the final and critical stage in which economic, technical, ethical, scientific, artistic, and spiritual expansion carries humanity 'to the heart of an always accelerated vortex of totalization upon itself' [de Chardin].³

Such a sense of the world as a whole is now so commonplace that its distinctiveness is easily forgotten (so that we think nothing of passing in the course of a single conversation from African politics to Japanese technology to Irish music):

The words *world civilization*, *universal domination*, *planetization*, *collective cerebralization* are expressed or inferred in everything that we say and think. Each person sees himself as master of the entire earth and of all that has existed on earth. (*F*, 73)

This global consciousness, while conducive to fantasies of human mastery, is also an existential dilemma. Blanchot is very much a thinker of the paradox and crises of thought induced by the need to think human existence as a whole (ultimately in its finitude and powerlessness), as opposed to analytic tasks of ‘understanding’ directed towards specific issues with a view to enhancing a sense of human power over things. The global ecological crisis could be called precisely ‘Blanchotian’ in its demand that we think increasingly, not in terms of regional projects of management or conservation within received frameworks of thought, but anew about the totality of human life. As in Blanchot’s essay on the atomic bomb (*F*, 101–8), the issue becomes to rethink ‘humanity’ as a question, a ‘who?’

Blanchot’s work overall offers a striking account of the kinds of conceptual and psychic forces that currently structure the minutiae of human thought and relations. His work as a critic attends in minute detail to how even seemingly common-sensical practices of reading, interpretation, and assumptions about knowledge as inherently synthetic, conceptual and systematizing etc., all link to global systems of political/social violence. Blanchot writes:

Even comprehension (...) is a grasp that gathers the diverse into unity, identifies the different, and brings the other back to the same through a reduction that dialectical movement, after a long trajectory, makes coincide with an overcoming. All these words — grasp, identification, reduction — conceal within themselves the rendering of accounts that exists in knowledge as its measure: reason must be given. What is to be known — the unknown — must surrender to the known.⁴

Insofar as these issues play themselves out in relation to the minutest attention to issues of reading and language in numerous texts, Blanchot’s work as a critic could be said to practise a kind of *micro-ecology* (‘think globally, act locally’).

The issue of wrongs done to other living creatures and of the finitude of the earth itself remains mostly latent here. Nevertheless, the seeming opacity and resistance of Blanchot’s work to ‘environmentalist’ issues may, paradoxically, form a challenge full of intellectual promise. Ultimately, Blanchot’s work may adumbrate a thinking that meets one of the most urgent demands of post-enlightenment thought, that is, resources towards a re-enchantment of the natural world that would not at the same time be a kind of mystification, evasion or deception.

Blanchot's Neo-anthropocentrism (1)

The seemingly minor status of the natural world as an issue in Blanchot may lie partly in what might be nicknamed his neo-anthropocentrism, a term that is meant more descriptively than pejoratively. This is his version of the argument, derived from Heidegger and re-inflected by Emmanuel Levinas, on the uniqueness of the human compared to the rest of nature.

Blanchot's attention is to the uniqueness of the immediate human environment—the realm of the sign and image, the mediation of the space of language—considered not in terms of the positivity of 'culture' but as a kind of rupture in being, without nostalgia for some supposed lost relation to 'nature'. He moves outside those concepts of 'nature' and 'culture' whose *pas de deux* has long dominated environmentalist and much other discourse in the West (those about 'art' and the 'animal' for instance). A striking essay in this respect is 'The Birth of Art' (*F*, 1–11) on prehistoric cave painting and the emergence of modern human beings. Blanchot's fascination with pre-history (involving the uncanny fact that other species of human being have existed and disappeared) correlates with what Stuart Kendall writes of Georges Bataille in this context: 'Prehistory is universal history par excellence because it is not merely the history of the West; it is global in its sweep and implications.'⁵

Blanchot describes a double movement of distinction between the modern human and the animal. First is the emergence of technology along with some sort of social structure and the prohibitions and taboos that accompany it:

pre-man *fortuitously* does violence to the natural givens, stands erect, rises up against himself, (...) becomes an animal raised by himself, works, and becomes thus something not natural, as far from what is natural as are the prohibitions that limit what he is in order to benefit what he can be. (*F*, 6)

This last point recalls numerous thinkers in defining the animal/human distinction in terms of the emergence of 'culture' through determinants to behaviour based on taboos. Human social organization involves the deferral and repression of the immediate individual impulse in view of the greater benefits of cooperative work and power over wild nature. This initial 'separation between man and animal' (*F*, 6), however, does not suffice to make early humans into truly fellow creatures of ours. The modern human being is no *animal rationale*. A second step is called for. What is uniquely (modern) human according to Blanchot,

following Bataille, is not only the power to create ritual, laws, and prohibitions and tools, but symbolically to transgress or destroy them. It is that freedom to negate, the power of beginning again, to abolish the real into the empty space of images and signs. For Blanchot, the emergence of modern humanity is indissociable here from that of language and 'art' (in the broadest sense of the creation of images and non-utilitarian designs). Here:

the gap between man and his origin is put into question once again and in some sense recovered, explored, and experienced: a prodigious contact with all of anterior reality (and first with animal reality) and thus a return to the first immensity, but a return that is always more than a return, for he who returns, although his movement gives him the illusion of abolishing millions of years of bondage, of submission, and weakness, also becomes tumultuously conscious of this impossible return, becomes conscious of the limits and the unique force that allows him to break these limits, does not simply lose himself in the dream of total existence but instead affirms himself as that which is added to this existence and (. . .) can appropriate it symbolically or communicate with it by making it be. (*F*, 6)

The essay on the caves of Lascaux affirms that art and modern humanity are coeval, born in a common double break from the natural world. Blanchot concludes: 'Art would thus provide us with our only authentic date of birth' (*F*, 7).

Blanchot also repeats the claim—still in dispute⁶—that Neanderthals had no art and that this corresponded to their radical difference from modern people. Only the latter stand in their existence amidst a realm of non-being, that of the image, of detachment from positivity, or can choose 'to stand on the inside or the outside of being as non-presence' (*F*, 9). So the disjunction between modern humanity and the rest of the natural world includes *even another human species*. It is as 'if the division of human possibilities (. . .) were in some sense determined by an exigency having little to do with the movement of evolution' (*F*, 9) for, Blanchot observes, evolution was clearly as likely as not to produce a humanity without art, 'freedom' or 'discontinuity', but still endowed with tools, fire, clothing and instruments of communication, etc. Only modern people, not the extinct Neanderthals, could be called *Dasein* in Heidegger's sense of beings transcending positivity, one whose being is continually an issue for it.

Art's seeming timelessness, Blanchot argues elsewhere, 'alludes only to the power that we have of putting an end to the world, of standing before or after the world' (*F*, 33). It is as if there were latent in even the earliest cave art those epochal 1960s images of the earth

from space, the fragile mottled sphere hanging in an unimaginable emptiness, images now forever associated with an emerging ecological consciousness. 'This is why', Blanchot continues, 'art is tied to all that puts man in danger, to everything that puts him violently outside the world, outside the security and intelligence of the world to which only the future belongs' (*F*, 33).

It cannot for any human being be a matter of leaving this third space, only of inhabiting and reconfiguring it in less violent ways. Any notion of a 'return' to some lost natural 'harmony' is intelligible to a reader of Blanchot only as an incoherence of thought. Hence Blanchot's remorseless arguments against all kinds of romantic nostalgia, the use of art ('an unreal thing in the world outside the world' (*IC*, 382)) for purposes of reconciliation with some supposedly 'lost' nature, some group or ethnic identity or allegiance or deeper life.

This is a Blanchot who cannot but be pitted against vast stretches of environmentalist thought, based as it usually is on a romantic programme of 'reconnection' with 'nature' or 'the earth'. Ultimately, however, Blanchot may offer a way of articulating global environmental crisis in terms that do not ultimately rest on forced claims of some lost 'kinship' and 'reciprocity' with nature.

Blanchot's Neo-anthropocentrism (2)

First, however, it is necessary to turn to some more problematic aspects of Blanchot's neo-anthropocentrism.

His meditative dialogues and essays often turn around the issue of modes for self-understanding that would enable human life to be thought without reference to illusory moral or metaphysical anchors, in 'God', 'nature', or seemingly self-evident 'values'. Kevin Hart has written of the importance of an ethics of the human relation in Blanchot's work overall, read as an attempt to 'preserve the sacred without religion' (206): 'To lose faith that life has an overarching meaning is not to dismiss mystery; it is to recognize that the human relation is mysterious, that the legitimate processes of demystification cannot find traction there.'⁷ Should this exclusive focus on 'the human' be accepted? Among such a wealth of living things and places is there really no other resistance to demystification? Is 'nothing (...) more strange than the human relation' (*DG*, 17)? To turn back to Blanchot's pages is to find that the ethical relation, such as he engages it after Levinas, seems entirely and exclusively a matter only of one human being to another.

The central claim of Blanchot's neo-anthropocentrism lies in the unique breach that art and language make within the positivity of being. This realm of 'discontinuity' underlies Blanchot's reworking of an ethics of *autrui* that both looks to and revises Levinas. It is crucial that *autrui* speaks. '*Autrui* speaks to me' (IC, 55). Blanchot defines *autrui* through the radical inflection which language may bring to the relation of one human being to another: '*the recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them*' (F, 291). At issue is the affirmation of 'a separation that is presupposed — not surmounted, but confirmed — in all *true* speech' (IC, 55; emphasis added), the lack of commonality between those who express themselves. Blanchot's appeal here is a norm of 'true' speech that seeks to let speak the very 'separation', rather than drive to accommodate both speakers within a shared identity, cultural horizon, common values, etc. The 'double dissymmetry' of the human relation — its refusal of linear geometry — lies in the fact that if the other (*autrui*) is never a self for me, even as he or she also transcends phenomenology, then the reverse is also true, but not in a dialectical fashion, for there is no symmetry that could become the foundation for a 'we', a common identity or platform.

Clearly, however, in positing that the emergence of the human and this affirmation of a space of discontinuity constitute the same event, Blanchot's argument about *autrui* must move within the presupposed circle of a shared *Dasein*. Only within some minimal kind of reciprocity between speakers is Blanchot's norm thinkable, affirming an infraction into the realm of shared terms, references and concepts that make up language. The 'double dissymmetry' remains *essentially and necessarily symmetrical* even as it maintains an infinity whereby one human being can never be an object or an intentional correlate of the other. The realm of the ethical seems exclusively human.

However, other aspects of Blanchot's argument implicitly destabilize his anthropocentrism. In this third space outside terms of equivalence and identity the human speakers may come to recognize

in impossibility our most human belonging to immediate human life, the life that it falls to us to sustain each time that, stripped through misfortune of the clothed forms of power, we reach the nakedness of every relation: that is to say, the relation to naked presence, the presence of the other. (IC, 47)

Blanchot's focus is on what remains of the human relation when stripped of all positivities of given identity or cultural belonging. This leads him, supposing himself forced to 'choose [his] ideology', to give

allegiance to a revised notion of ‘humanism’ — the humanism of ‘the cry — that is to say, the murmur; cry of need or of protest, cry without words and without silence, an ignoble cry’ (IC, 262).

A reduction to the most basic, stripped ‘humanness’ — the helpless appeal of a complete vulnerability — this is what Blanchot sees in the victims of the concentration camps: ‘human existence pure and simple, lived as lack at the level of need’ (IC, 133). So, in a sense, it is in the acultural, deprived condition of being reduced to a quasi ‘animal’ existence, one might say, that the true claim of humanness becomes manifest, an ethical claim which no power can abolish. This ‘man reduced to the irreducible’ (IC, 133) cries out in the ethical appeal that the other makes to me, not only ‘as though this Self were in my place, but [also to] become responsible for it by recognizing in it an injustice committed against everyone’ (IC, 134). This is where some kind of re-entry of the other into the realm of ‘dialectical struggle’ (IC, 134), social identities and moral norms, systems of justice, etc., must occur. The sense of an ‘injustice committed against everyone’ may acquire, in court, the legal status of a ‘crime against humanity’.

However it is at just this same Kantian point — of a universalization that sees in the one wrong a wrong committed against all — that the question of the human/animal distinction again becomes urgent and destabilizing. In relation to the suffering of a creature of another species, Blanchot’s ‘humanism’ becomes problematic. How can I think ‘as though this Self were in my place’, and how can that sense of suffering become then the basis of an appeal to all who could likewise suffer? Who could ‘all’ or ‘everyone’ be within such a situation? It could surely never include, for instance, the stoat that needs to have killed that leveret in order to eat? Here no kind of broader ‘society’ exists into which the naked appeal of suffering can be taken up.

Blanchot’s argument on the *autrui* and the human relation attempts to hold together two separate issues. One is the ethical claim of vulnerability, the cry of another’s suffering. The other is the disruption of *autrui* within language taken as a horizon of equivalence, the refusal to be embraced within the horizon of given categories and identities and the challenge of a neutral space that escapes their purchase. These two arguments dovetail into each other forcefully in Blanchot’s text, but they only do so if one assumes that the relation at issue is exclusively that of one human being to another. However, the issue of non-human suffering, vast and incalculable as it is, can make Blanchot’s use of the term *autrui* look clumsy. Only within a presupposed horizon of a common belonging to modern humanity (or *Dasein*) does it make

sense to use it, as Blanchot does, to name at once both a refusal of given terms and identities, in the name of the otherness of the other, *and* the powerlessness of the ethical appeal of vulnerability and suffering.

The following paragraph exemplifies another problematic part of Blanchot's neo-anthropocentrism. An interlocutor in a dialogue in *The Infinite Conversation* argues, on the topic of the *autrui*, the other (person):

[Man] alone is the unknown, he alone the other, and in this he would be *presence*: such is man (. . .). Each time we project strangeness onto a non-human being or refer the movement of the unknown back to the universe, we disburden ourselves of the weight of man. We sometimes imagine in a very impoverished fashion our frightened encounter in the sky of the planets and the stars with a different and superior being, and we ask ourselves: what would happen? A question to which we can perfectly well respond, for this being has always been there: it is man, man whose presence gives us all measure of strangeness. (*IC*, 60)

The argument here may seem unacceptably extreme, nor is it really qualified later in the dialogue. Are the sea, the stars, the forests really to be allowed no 'strangeness' but that which they reflect back from the human face? Even given innumerable qualifications well known to readers of Blanchot, that would still be a kind of 'deification' of the human.⁸

However, Blanchot's neo-anthropocentrism may also contain some surprising resources. Elsewhere, it is not a matter of humanity forming alone 'the unknown' or 'strange', but rather of the human relation as revealing such dimensions of existence more generally, giving access to a comparable sense of singularity in the realm of other creatures and things.

Blanchot's micro-ecological thinking concerns both a form of politics that is not a quest for power and kinds of knowledge and language that would not be a mode of synthetic force. Blanchot challenges the presupposition that being consists fundamentally in a unity, one which conveniently corresponds with notions of knowledge as conceptual synthesis. He surmises: 'why should not man, supposing that the discontinuous is proper to him and is his work, reveal that the *ground of things* — to which he must surely in some way belong — has as much to do with the demand of discontinuity as it does with that of unity?' (*IC*, 9). In other words, being cannot finally be correlated with that drive in human knowledge to synthesize, unify, and to explain under the aegis of a system of governing concepts. Singularity, disunity,

opacity and the incalculable are ‘fundamental’ to the ultimate nature of things. The human relation remains the unavoidable mode of access to this issue, but is not the sole bearer of such singularity (*IC*, 10).

Impossibility, Physis, Nature

One of Blanchot’s rare references to the natural world in *The Infinite Conversation* pivots on its very ‘meaninglessness’: ‘[A]ll modern humanism’, writes Blanchot, ‘the work of science, and planetary development have as their object a dissatisfaction with what is, and thus the desire to transform being—to negate it in order to derive power from it and to make of this power to negate the infinite movement of human mastery.’ Thus anything (such as Bataille’s notion of ‘interior experience’) which annuls the scope of conceptualization and human power ‘lays waste at one stroke to our attempts to dominate the earth and to free ourselves from nature by giving it a meaning—that is, by denaturing it’ (*IC*, 149).

Human aggression against the indifference of nature is also a denial of death. Reading so much of Western thought as the attempt to make death ‘possible’, that is, part of the realm of human power and meaning, aligns Blanchot with innumerable thinkers in the deep ecology movement for whom such denial underlies the planetary directives of techno-science to command nature and all its resources.⁹ As Blanchot suggests, the necessity to which ‘everything in the world submits’ is death; or rather it is

the refusal of death—the temptation of the eternal, all that leads men to prepare a space of permanence where truth, even if it should perish, may be restored to life. The concept (therefore all language) is the instrument in this enterprise of establishing a secure reign. (*IC*, 33)

By describing something as ‘impossible’, then, Blanchot means not that it cannot exist, but that its existence is not the effect of any human power, decision or intention. ‘Impossibility’, writes Blanchot, is ‘a relation escaping power’ (*IC*, 38). In this sense, of course, all the basic dimensions of existence—birth, health, death, needs and passions, and the immediate recalcitrance of things—are impossible. Human beings cannot ultimately command them. The impossible is ‘our ultimate dimension’ (*IC*, 48) and ‘impossibility is being itself’ (*IC*, 47). Being alive is itself ‘impossible’ in Blanchot’s sense!

Strange though it may sound at first, much of Blanchot’s concept of ‘the impossible’ correlates with the Aristotelian sense of *physis*

in Heidegger's reading 'On the Essence and Concept of *Physis* in Aristotle's *Physics B*, I' (1939).¹⁰ (Heidegger's essay also begins by citing exactly the same poem by Hölderlin that will be prominent in Blanchot's essay on poetry and the impossible (*IC*, 38–48)). *Physis* is the term inadequately translated as 'nature'. It is that fundamental self-originating, ordering and resting of things within which all human life finds itself. It cannot be fully conceptualised, for it cannot even be thought without having been presupposed: 'Whatever produces itself, i.e. places itself into its appearance, needs no fabrication. If it did, this would mean an animal could not reproduce itself without mastering the science of its own zoology' (*Pathmarks*, 222).

Compare Blanchot on 'impossibility': 'impossibility [is] that in which one is always already engaged through an experience more initial than any initiative, forestalling all beginning and excluding any movement of action to disengage from it' (*IC*, 46).

A thinking of *physis* then is implicit in Blanchot's account of 'impossibility' both as being and as that in being which must precede ontology, since it cannot be negated. The switch in terminology from '*physis*' or 'nature' to 'the impossible' might seem partly a mark of Blanchot's neo-anthropocentrism (as well as of the influence of Bataille's *The Impossible*).¹¹ Being as impossibility is characterised entirely in terms of its relation to the human — one of non-power! To denominate everything in the universe outside human power 'the impossible' may seem merely the inverse of a hopelessly megalomaniac human-centred metaphysics. However, Blanchot, in affirming 'the impossible', is foregrounding just that element of so much Western thought.

The notion of *physis* is crucial in Blanchot's reading of the poetry of René Char. There is even a sense in which Blanchot is almost too eager to skip over 'nature' in the sense of individual creatures and things in favour of *physis* generally:

Nature has a powerful hold over [Char's] work, but nature does not only mean all terrestrial objects, or the sun, or the oceans, or the wisdom of enduring men; it is not even all things together, not the plenitude of the universe, nor the infinity of the cosmos, but that which already precedes 'the whole', is immediate and very distant, is more real than all real things and lies forgotten in every thing, the bond that cannot be bound and by which everything, the whole, is bound. Nature, in the work of René Char, is this exposure to the origin.¹²

A major question can be posed at this point. Is there then an analogy between the original underlying meaninglessness of

nature — unnegatable, chastening of all human self-aggrandisement — and an element of art, Char's poetry for instance, with its own ordeal of another kind of powerlessness and contestation? As we have seen, in the emergence of art, prehistoric man found 'a prodigious contact with all of anterior reality (and first with animal reality) and thus a return to the first immensity'.

This seeming analogy would make Blanchot look close to that post-Kantian tradition of aesthetics which understands the peculiarity of the achieved work of art by reference to something similar in natural phenomena. For Blanchot, however, the impossibility of art inheres in its constitutive breach from the natural world, as in the moment of cave art. The break is a jump, one not explicable in terms of laws governing natural phenomena, even those of evolution. The 'impossibility' of art cannot be merely identified with the ultimate 'impossibility' of natural phenomena.

A better summary formulation of the relation might be this: whereas Heidegger may attribute to art a potential grounding role in human affairs, for Blanchot the impossibility in art and language may highlight that contestation of all anthropocentrism inherent in *physis* and natural phenomena. To make this issue more concrete let us turn to another of the rare occasions on which Blanchot uses an image from the natural world. Early in *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot contrasts two simple modes of expression:

'*The sky is blue*', '*Is the sky blue? Yes.*' One need be no great scholar to recognize what separates them. The 'Yes' does not at all restore the simplicity of the flat affirmation; in the question the blue of the sky has given way to the void. The blue, however, has not dissipated. On the contrary, it has been raised dramatically up to its *possibility*: beyond its being and unfolding in the intensity of this new space, certainly more blue than it has ever been, in a more intimate relation with the sky, in the instant — the instant of the question where everything is in instantaneity. Yet hardly is the Yes pronounced, and even as it confirms in its new brilliance the blue of the sky brought into intimacy with the void, we become aware of what has been lost. Transformed for an instant into pure possibility, the state of things does not return to what it was. (*IC*, 12–13)

The question affirms 'the gift and the richness of possibility' (*IC*, 13), 'gift' being effectively synonymous here with the impossibility of nature. This is perhaps a simple instance of the 'human relation' bearing upon a natural phenomenon, against the 'void' of outer space as effectively human space, in such a way as to foreground the sky in its instantaneity and singularity. In the seemingly trivial grammar of a

question, Blanchot traces 'the illuminating force that brings being to the fore' (IC, 13).

Blanchot argues that Char's practice of a fragmentary, non-synthetic writing may adumbrate an irenic language, one that would preserve the unknown as unknown. On Char's 'fragmentary' and paratactic mode of writing we read:

Speech as archipelago: cut up into the diversity of its islands and thus causing a surging of the great open sea; this ancient immensity, the unknown always still to come, designated for us by the emergence of the earth's infinitely divided depths. (IC, 309)

The subject of this extended metaphor is speech or language. This is being compared to nature as *physis* or origin in the guise of 'the great open sea' and the 'emergence of the earth's infinitely divided depths'. This is not the familiar romantic position, however, that art or language and nature are analogous. The force of language inheres here in its action of breaking away and breaking apart: '*Speech as archipelago*: cut up into the diversity of its islands'. This diversity of fragmentation and dispersal is said to cause 'a surging of the great open sea' and of 'the unknown always still to come'. Language, then, is not a second-order *physis*. It enacts and affirms humanity's constitutive breach with nature and yet, in the process, also unblocks what is singular and non-synthetic more generally in relation to the emergence of unpredictable possibilities. In this way, one might say that the element of the unknown, first apparent in the human relation, becomes generalized through a kind of return without return to that 'first immensity'. Thus 'man, supposing that the discontinuous is proper to him and is his work, reveal[s] that *the ground of things* (. . .) has much to do with the demand of discontinuity as it does with that of unity' (IC, 9).¹³

It is in the third realm of language that a different and irenic relation to things lies latent, as well as a different relation to other sentient beings. ('Reality without the dislocating energy of poetry, what would that be?' (Char).¹⁴) Such language may effect a force of contestation and un-meaning which may re-enchanted natural phenomena through an intensification of the sense of their otherness and giftedness.

Environmentalists often draw attention (like Blanchot) to the destructive effects of current paradigms of knowledge as ideally 'objective', mathematically quantifiable and decontextualized, a model that transforms reality into a homogenous set of formally expressed relations. Against this, Blanchot's work offers a detailed reflection on

modes of thought and language that enable an irenic and irreplaceable singularization, discontinuity and openness, one irreconcilable with received modes of coherence, synthesis, logical consequence and ‘development’:

A developed thought is a reasonable thought; it is also, I would add, a political thought, for the generality it strives for is that of the universal State when there will be no more private truth and when everything that exists will submit to a common denominator. (*IC*, 339)

‘Poetry: dispersion that, as such, finds its form’ (*IC*, 360). Such issues are at work even in that blend of the elusive and intense lucidity that forms the allure of Blanchot’s ‘style’. Its quality is that of the limpidity of swift streaming water, at once both monotonous and always fresh.

Blanchot’s deeper ecology?

Blanchot’s micro-ecology moves to identify and counter the kinds of conceptual violence inherent even in the most seemingly common-sensical or innocent modes of thought or speech. Were one to try to align this side of Blanchot’s work with any contemporary school of environmentalist thought it would surely be with those ‘eco-feminists’ and ‘social ecologists’ who trace humanity’s rapacious attitude to the natural world to the violence that predominates in relations between human beings themselves. Verena Conley, for instance, writes:

The destructive urge of our culture can be linked with a patriarchy that organizes society according to a sexual model that is in fact a martial model. This martial model has its correlative in the economic model of competition and consumption that, while benefiting a few, has led to much of the planet’s degradation.¹⁵

Nevertheless, almost all work in environmentalist philosophy and ethics would also be vulnerable to a Blanchot-style deeper ecology. A good instance of the kind of romantic position that Blanchot’s work undermines is Max Oelschlager’s essay, ‘Earth-Talk: Conservation and the Ecology of Language’.¹⁶ Oelschlager’s text shares with Blanchot traces of Heidegger’s influence as well as a common attention to language as a decisive human environment. For both, a change in conceptions of language is essential to any fundamental shift in how human beings conceive themselves. Oelschalger argues that even the very terms ‘environment’ and ‘environmentalist’ enact the presumption that humanity stands centre stage in a drama of one, surrounded by its ‘environment’ as a kind of scenery. It is at this point, however,

that Oelschlager moves into familiar romantic territory, idealizing 'primary cultures' without literacy and writing as enacting a truer, supposedly non-dualistic understanding of the human relation to the natural world: 'it is through language generally, and through literacy more particularly, that we have been alienated from the first world' (51). Oelschlager addresses the nature/culture dichotomy split by an argument familiar to literary specialists since the time of the high romantic poets, for 'it is also through language that we can return' (51). He praises the literary practice of Gary Snyder and 'earth talk' as modes of language that understand human beings non-dualistically, as part and not master of a habitat. Oelschlager asks that we be attentive to the way 'primary oral cultures have allowed the flora and fauna "to speak"' (52).

The contrast with Blanchot could not be stronger. The issue for him is not to overcome some mind/nature dualism through a more 'natural' kind of language, but to intensify the very 'discontinuity' and interruption in being which the 'human relation', as it is borne in language, poses and is posed by. This produces some very different if still generally positive readings of some pre- or non-scientific modes of language (for example, the words of Heraclitus (*IC*, 85–92)). The human relation, borne in language, holds open a discontinuity in being more generally—an un-meaning and wildness that cannot be contained by given concepts of unity, synthesis or by that 'knowledge' which has almost always been defined by such principles.

Blanchot affirms the disturbing yet irenic force of this worklessness, as in the following fragment from *The Step Not Beyond*. This brings a strange twist to the familiar romantic topoi of the garden and lost childhood:

All words are adult. Only the space in which they reverberate—a space infinitely empty, like a garden where, even after the children have disappeared, their joyful cries continue to be heard—leads them back towards the perpetual death in which they seem to keep being born.¹⁷

Strikingly, it is the already lost status of Eden that emerges here as the principle of 'beginning'. A language exposed to its own finitude and the violence of the break from the immediate is also one held anew in the space of its own genesis. What is the force of this strange simile for the space in which a word or words reverberate: 'like a garden where, even after the children have disappeared, their joyful cries continue to be heard'? This movement of unworking in the language, considered as the constitutive human environment,

becomes, through the acknowledgement of finitude and evanescence, an irenic affirmation of 'impossibility' as a force of beginning. The reference to children recalls the concept of 'natality' in Hannah Arendt's sense, that 'with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world'.¹⁸ This strange space, whose cold fecundity inheres in its very finitude, stands in Blanchot's work in place of Hölderlin's 'Nature', Heidegger's '*physis*' and Rilke's '*das Offene*'.

Blanchot's '*naming the possible, responding to the impossible*' (IC, 48) might even make an excellent summary reformulation of some of the aims of the deep ecology movement. The deep ecologist Peter Reed, for instance, argues that a sense of the otherness of nature may be a better basis for deep ecology than those dubious narratives of an intensifying human identification with the earth found in Arne Naess and Warwick Fox. In Michael Zimmerman's words: 'Encountering the "austere mystery" of dominant nature can reveal our intrinsic insignificance (...). Only by cultivating this difference, rather than seeking to overcome it through wider identification, can people retain appropriate respect for the wholly Other.'¹⁹ At the same time, Blanchot's work refuses, in its very constitution, that temptation which a deep ecologist never seems able to resist, that of making a new foundation or absolutist ground out of 'nature' or the 'earth'.

A World without Impossibility

To conclude I wish to turn to a thought experiment, taken from Edward O. Wilson's *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (1984). Wilson writes:

Visualize a beautiful and peaceful world, where the horizon is rimmed by snowy peaks reaching into a perfect sky. In the central valley, waterfalls tumble down the faces of steep cliffs into a crystalline lake. On the crest of the terminal bluff sits a house containing food and every technological convenience. Artisans have worked across the terrain below to create a replica of one of Earth's landscape treasures, perhaps a formal garden from late eighteenth-century England, or the Garden of the Golden Pavilion at Kyoto, marked by an exquisite balance of water, copse, and trail. The setting is the most visually pleasing that human imagination can devise. Except for one thing—it contains no life whatever. This world has always been dead. The vegetation of the garden is artificial, shaped from plastic and colored by master craftsman down to the last blade and stem. Not a single microbe floats in the lake or lies dormant in the ground. The only sounds are the

broken rhythms of the falling water and an occasional whisper of wind through the plastic trees.²⁰

Such a landscape, corresponding perhaps to some future lunar colony, is nightmarish. 'This is a world (...) where people would find their sanity at risk' (115).

How does this thought experiment relate to Blanchot's work? As we have seen, Blanchot conceptualizes nature in terms of *physis* and the 'impossibility' of being. The natural realm is not to be hastily assimilated to a possible object of human power. Is it not the lack of 'impossibility' in just Blanchot's sense that renders Wilson's false paradise so horrific? '[T]he impossible is not there in order to make thought capitulate, but in order to allow it to announce itself according to a measure other than that of power' (IC, 43).

Wilson's thought experiment helps particularize what is at issue in Blanchot's notion of the impossible. Wilson's pseudo-beautiful landscape is the physical realization of complex programmes for so-called 'artificial life', that is, self-organizational algorithms that simulate life-like qualities without actually being alive. Such 'artificial life' might seem 'impossible' in the limited sense that no human brain, unaided, could model and so understand it. Yet it would still not be impossible in Blanchot's sense. Even if artificial life were indistinguishable from the real thing the sense of nightmare remains and is undeniable.

It is in this respect that Bill McGibben's polemic *The Death of Nature* seems so Blanchotian as an affirmation of and lament for the impossibility of nature. He argues that '*we have ended the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us—its separation from human society*'.²¹ Nature as a whole, argues McGibben, is losing its wildness (its 'impossibility') and becoming, however clumsily, part of the sphere of human fabrication.

In altering the planet's atmosphere, humanity has rendered even the most distant mountain winds part of the sphere of human fabrication. 'Yes, the wind still blows—but no longer from some other sphere, some inhuman place' (EN, 49). The rain is likewise altered, perhaps just slightly chemically, but the sense of rain shifts drastically. McKibben narrates an experience of disenchantment felt one autumn when listening to the sound of rushing water in the Adirondack Mountains:

as I sat there (...) and thought about the dry summer we'd just come through, there was nothing awe-inspiring or instructive, or even lulling, in the fall of water.

It suddenly seemed less like a waterfall than like a spillway to accommodate the overflow of a reservoir. (EN, 96)

For people in less remote areas such disenchantments are enacted daily on the edge of every growing conurbation: a wood of mixed oak and birch, physically untouched by the major road that has been built nearby, is trashed nevertheless. Blanchot's concept of the impossible is apt as a name for what is suppressed—that which provokes us to think 'according to a measure other than that of power' (IC, 43). Yet, as the whole planet is transformed into an object of human use and management, 'the world outdoors will mean much the same thing as the world indoors, the hill the same thing as the house' (EN, 48). If genetic engineering posits a living organism as a self-replicating soft machine, it removes the creature from that realm of *physis* to which Heidegger had opposed the modern conception of organisms as merely 'artefacts that make themselves' (*Pathmarks*, 195). Would coming across a genetically engineered rabbit in the countryside, McGibben asks, be much different from finding a discarded coke can?

Blanchot offers no counter-politics of human liberation, self-affirmation or the retrieval of some lost relation to 'nature' as ground. His affirmation of the impossible offers a chastening step sideways, the cultivation of a force of natality, 'beginning' as a discontinuous, unmeaning and acultural element in the human realm generally, one that also affirms the uniqueness and singularity of natural phenomena, of *physis*. This is the 'wild' in the sense of a space outside use, something which is not part of the realm of human power. As we saw, Blanchot's neo-anthropocentrism bears elements of a problematic human exclusiveness. At the same time his work overall performs a re-enchantment without mystification of both some human artifacts and of natural phenomena, touching both with elements of his coldly non-redemptive notion of the sacred.

NOTES

- 1 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 134 ff.
- 2 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 36. *Thomas the Obscure* [1950 version], translated by Robert Lamberton (New York, Station Hill Press, 1988), 112–14.

- 3 Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997), 73. All further references to the book will be given in the text, preceded with the abbreviation *F*.
- 4 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson. (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1993), 43. All further references to the book will be given in the text, preceded with the abbreviation *IC*.
- 5 Stuart Kendall, 'Introduction' in Georges Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, edited by Stuart Kendall, translated by Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (New York, Zone Books, 2005), 15.
- 6 See Ian Tattersall and Jeffrey Schwarz, *Extinct Humans* (Oxford, Westview Press, 2001), 213–19.
- 7 Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5. All further references will be given in the text, preceded by the abbreviation *DG*.
- 8 In another passage on the ethical claim of the other person, we read: 'true exteriority is not that of objects, nor that of *an indifferent nature* or the immense universe (which it is always possible to attain through a relation of power by keeping it within the realm of my representation, the horizon of my knowledge, my view, my negation, and even my ignorance)' (*IC*, 69; emphasis added). This passage, unlike others we will turn to shortly, seems to reduce nature to an indifferent object, merely part of the realm of what can be mastered by human power or knowledge. Life itself, the capacity for sentience and suffering also seems oddly missing from this account: it moves from 'objects' to 'an indifferent nature', then to 'the immense universe'.
- 9 See Michael Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), 216 ff.
- 10 Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, edited by William McNeill (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 183–230.
- 11 Georges Bataille, *The Impossible*, translated by Robert Hurley (San Francisco, City Light Books, 1991).
- 12 Maurice Blanchot, 'The Beast of Lascaux,' translated by Leslie Hill, *Oxford Literary Review*, 22 (2000), 9–18 (15).
- 13 Reiner Schürmann writes of Char that 'In the poem all things just begin. "Le poète, grand Commenceur" (the poet, great Beginner) (...), says Char. Again, this beginning is neither mythical nor religious. The presence that it inaugurates neither founds anything nor even lasts.' See Reiner Schürmann, 'Situating René Char: Hölderlin, Heidegger, Char and the "There is"', *Boundary 2*, 4 (1976), 513–34 (521).
- 14 'Pour un Prométhée saxifrage. En touchant la main éolienne de Hölderlin', *La Parole en archipel* (Paris, Gallimard, 1962), 125.
- 15 Verena Andermatt Conley, *Ecopolitics: The Environment in Poststructuralist Thought* (London, Routledge, 1997), 132.

- 16 In *Wild Ideas*, edited by David Rothenberg (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 42–56.
- 17 Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, translated by Lycette Nelson (Albany, SUNY Press, 1992), 19.
- 18 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edition (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958), 178. For Blanchot's 'natality'/'beginning' see Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the Later Gadamer* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 115–23.
- 19 *Contesting Earth's Future*, 303.
- 20 *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1984), 114.
- 21 Bill McGibben, *The End of Nature: Humanity, Climate Change and the Natural World*, revised edition (London, Bloomsbury, 2003), 68. All further references to the book will be given in the text, preceded with the abbreviation *EN*.